

Homes and Safer Communities,  
Consumer & Business Affairs  
Section:  
COVID-19 -position statement

Environment and Public  
Protection Scrutiny

24<sup>th</sup> November 2020

[carmarthenshire.gov.uk](http://carmarthenshire.gov.uk)

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## **1. What is the purpose of this report?**

The purpose of this report is to provide Scrutiny members with a high-level summary of the impact COVID-19 (C-19) has had on Public Protection services over the last 8 months from a service user, staff and Council perspective. The report also looks ahead in terms of what are the implications moving forward as well as key lessons learnt.

This report will focus on key delivery issues and developments in the following areas:

- Test, Track and Trace (TTP);
- Animal Health ;
- Licensing;
- Financial Investigation Unit;
- Trading Standards;
- COVID-19 Team- Advice and Enforcement;
- Pollution;
- Public Health and Well-being; and
- Food, Safety and Health

## **2. What impact has C-19 had on services and what changes have we seen?**

At the outset, tribute should be paid to our remarkable staff and managers whose commitment in dealing with the most difficult of situations has been outstanding. From homelessness, housing management and community engagement through to development and investment the flexibility and adaptability shown has been first class and is certainly a blue-print for moving forward.

Some services have remained fully functional during the COVID period, although certain other areas have seen reduced or suspended activity e.g. food standards, hygiene and animal feed inspections, Proceeds of Crime (POCA) court work etc.

Since 23 March 2020, we have hopefully adapted quickly and effectively to address issues emerging from the pandemic. We have actively sought to support consumers, particularly the most vulnerable, and much of our routine work has continued, remotely where appropriate (e.g. processing of licensing/taxi/Buy with Confidence applications, non-COVID 19 related complaints and requests for advice, taxi vehicle test, and ongoing investigations)

a) **Test, Trace, Protect (TTP)- what is it?**

In order to respond to the COVID crisis a new TTP team has been set up within Public Protection services, managed by an Infection Prevention and Control Manager. In total, over 30 staff now work in this area. This gives an indication of the scale of the work and our response to it.

The team links in with our regional and Hywel Dda Health Board colleagues to manage the TTP process.

**TTP involves:**

**Testing** those people who have coronavirus symptoms, asking them to isolate from wider family, friends and their community whilst taking a test and waiting for a result.

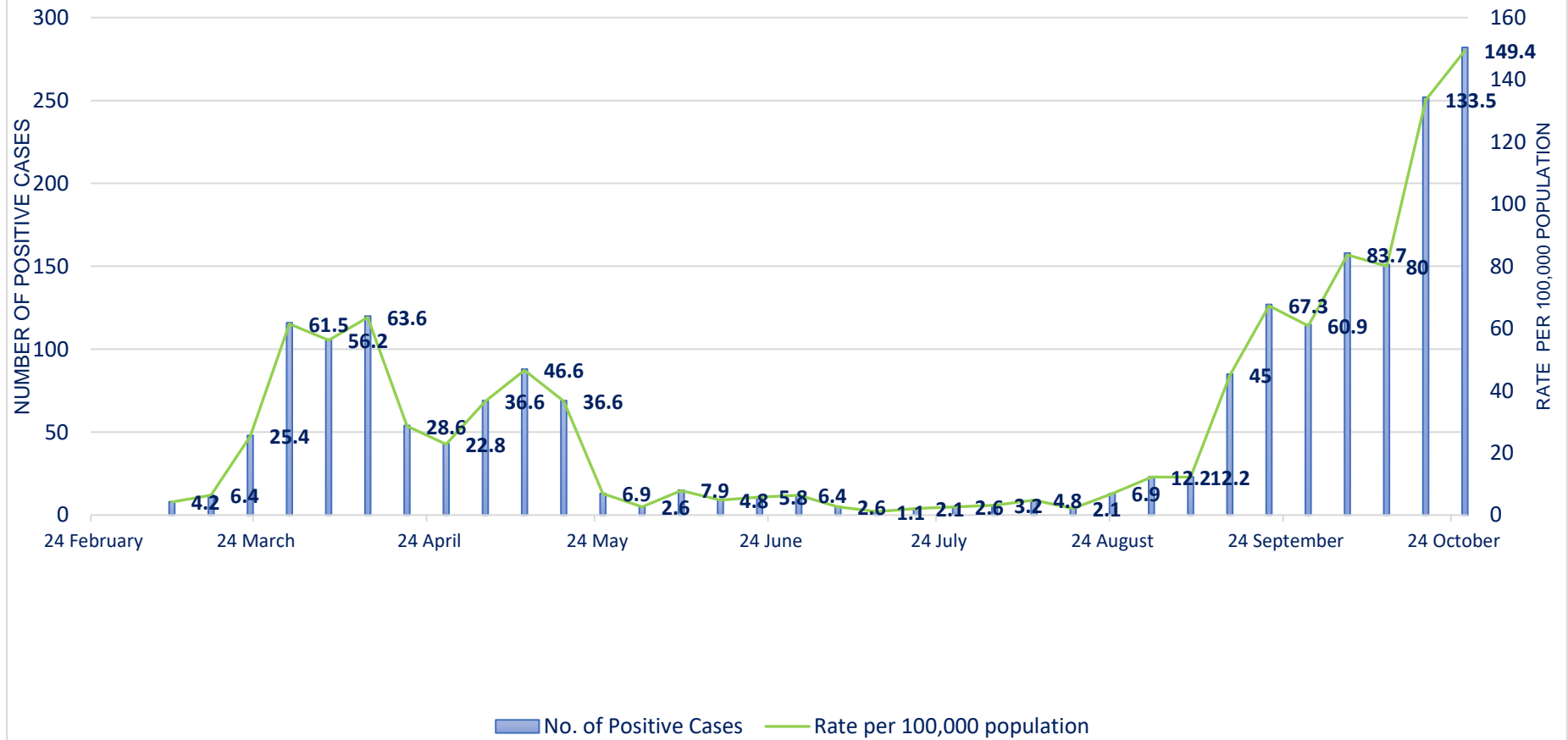
**Tracing** those people who have been in close contact with the symptomatic/tested person, requiring them to take precautions through self-isolation

**Providing advice and guidance**, particularly if the person who has symptoms or their contacts are in the shielding group or the at risk group, vulnerable or at greater risk.

We have set up a specific team in Carmarthenshire, linking in with our regional and Hywel Dda Health Board colleagues to manage the TTP process.

Figure 1 gives an overall picture of COVID 19 rates in the County since March 2020. All positive cases, and their identified contacts, would then have been contacted by the team.

### PHW Dashboard Weekly Positive Cases with the Cases per 100,000 Population within Carmarthenshire



As an example of current performance for the week 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2020 to 8<sup>th</sup> November 2020.

- **94%** of cases received were made contact with;
- **82%** of these cases were contacted within 24 hours;
- **91%** were contacted within 48 hours; and
- Each positive case generates about 3 to 4 direct contacts.

Various members of the team also focus on key settings such as the community, care homes and schools. The team is likely to be in place for the next 12 months.

#### b) **Animal Health**

Animal Health have adapted effectively during the pandemic with a particular focus on:

- Continuing visits to livestock markets, collection centres, Slaughterhouses and Hauliers to ensure that C-19 restrictions were followed. **One** warning letter has been issued;
- Providing traders with detailed C-19 advice and guidance on **1051** queries. Many business closure enquiries were received, which included dog breeders checking on whether they could continue to trade/reapply for licences as well as traders checking whether services relevant to their trade, such as tuberculosis testing, were continuing. Enquiries regarding the movement of animals/delivery of dogs were also popular;
- Providing all **74** licensed dog breeders with regular C-19 advice and guidance;
- Creating a C-19 support group for the farming community, comprising the National Farmers Union, Farmers Union of Wales, Young Farmers Institute, local banks, animal feed producers, agricultural suppliers, markets, and charitable organisations. **4850** farmers have been contacted and provided with, business, financial, and well being support; and

- Recovering an increasing amount of animal carcasses which were being dumped on common land (**6 during a single week**), due to a lack of collection and increased price of collecting fallen stock;

#### c) **Financial Investigation Unit**

Despite a period of court closures, our Financial Investigation Unit has remained functional. With **three** Financial Investigators now in post, the unit took on new C-19 related cases as well as other matters. Over the period, their work included:

- Agreeing a Memorandum of Understanding with Natural Resource Wales which will increase work level and financial awards;
- Applying for production orders for a Carmarthenshire money laundering investigation into property and gold bullion;
- Negotiating a **£55,000** settlement for a dog breeding financial investigation;
- Progressing ongoing investigations;
- Completing a National Crime Agency competency audit for all Financial Investigators; and
- Undertaking new investigations into counterfeit/unsafe hand sanitiser and fraudulent practices regarding C-19 business grants.

#### d) **Licensing**

Our Licensing team responded to the developing C-19 situation by:

- Liaising with the Dyfed Powys Police (DPP) licensing officer to ensure that complaints made to the Police were shared on a daily basis with the Licensing Team to direct compliance and monitoring visits;
- Providing advice to licence holders regarding amendments to the Licensing Act 2003 during the emergency period e.g. Business and Planning Act amendments permitting off sales of alcohol;
- Responding to requests for advice from businesses looking to establish new outdoor consumption areas and liaising with other Council departments such as highways and property services;

- Undertaking joint visits, often out of hours, to licensed premises with Trading Standards, Environmental Health (EH) officers and DPP to advise and enforce C-19 regulations;
- Responding to enquiries regarding Annual Fee Payments in relation to **812** premises and **68** club premises and establishing whether the businesses had chosen to re-open when the regulations permitted;
- Regularly sending bulk email messages providing C-19 guidance and updates to the licensed trade as and when WG regulations were amended or updated (**1000+**);
- Introducing a deferred payments system for the taxi trade and the payment of annual fees where financial hardship was demonstrated; and
- Arranging a virtual Four Counties Licensing Forum meeting to discuss licensing amendments with Police and LA representatives across the region;

In addition, some routine work continued throughout with various changes and adaptations to the way services were delivered:

Due to restrictions on face to face interaction, the Licensing Policy Review and Consultation was paused. A revised consultation and review process will be commenced shortly.

#### e) **Trading Standards**

The contribution made by our Trading Standards team in response to C-19 related issues includes:

- Extensive research into the safety and suitability of PPE being supplied to the Council;
- Responding to consumer complaints regarding consumer/trader contractual issues, mostly, in relation to disputes arising from cancelled flights, hotel bookings, sporting events and home maintenance/building contracts etc.,
- Undertaking joint visits, often out of hours, to licensed premises with Licensing, EH officers and DPP to advise and enforce C-19 regulations;
- Undertaking remote audits of **104** businesses that have offered their services to the Council;

- Conducting **55** welfare telephone calls to trueCall© clients;
- Creating a joint initiative with DPP delivering leaflets to our No Cold Calling Zones containing extremely useful information to older and vulnerable people in these areas (**1825** homes).
- Informing businesses on how they can identify and protect themselves from scams (distributed via our own contacts and via Marketing and Communications newsletter to approx. **1500** businesses);
- Providing an immediate response to intelligence received concerning sudden and unexplained price rises included warning letters, targeted visits, and market surveillance. (**15** intelligence reports received; **7** visits conducted between 23 March and 24 May 2020.);
- Utilising FESS safeguarding initiatives on **7** occasions to provide support to vulnerable consumers, including those referred by Social Care;
- Responding to national scam intelligence, over **100** victims were contacted, supported, and provided with a variety of informative materials via email including a general C-19 advice and guidance flyer;
- Gathering and examining digital advertisements during e-visits – During the first 3 weeks of lockdown, approximately **212** separate adverts were inspected, **25** of these were referred for further investigation, and further action was taken on **8** occasions;
- Conducting **16** campaign visits to fuel stations - inspecting, advising, and offering support on C-19 related issues, including guiding the implementation of social distancing measures at these premises;
- Undertaking **6** visits in conjunction with DPP to provide C-19 advice regarding opening and transmission reduction procedures at car wash premises.
- Conducting visits with Licensing officers in response to intelligence that off-licensed premises were selling alcohol to underage children;
- Verifying metrology equipment onsite or in our lab, as appropriate, for food manufacturers to ensure integrity within the food chain- **30** service requests were fulfilled.



- Jointly undertaking visits with an EH health and safety specialist to **14** high-density workplaces;
- Conducting **26** welfare visits to holiday parks providing support and advising on C-19 related issues; and
- Training a team of *Ambassadors* who undertook **107** survey visits relating to Test, Trace and Protect in Town Centres.

f) **Newly formed COVID-19 team- Advice and Enforcement**

As a result of responding to intelligence received concerning non-compliance with C-19 regulations, we have issued **14** improvement notices and **14** closure notices between 23 March 2020 and 1 October 2020.

Although our teams adapted rapidly to provide an effective C-19 response, a single **Business Compliance Team** was formed in October 2020 to further support this activity.

***Business Compliance Team***

- Since 5 October 2020, our *Ambassador Team*, conducted **753** proactive visits to commercial premises throughout the county. **Eight** premises were referred to the *Enforcement Team* for further investigation;
- Our *Triage Team* of qualified officers (with a dedicated manager) dealt with **323** C-19 enquiries;
- The *Enforcement Team* have responded to the intelligence received from the *Triage and Ambassador Teams* as well as intelligence received concerning the night economy. They have conducted **213** enforcement visits since 2 October 2020, issuing **5** improvement notices and **6** closure notices;

g) **Pollution**

**Statutory nuisances/drainage issues** – Increase in complaints (1150 from April-Oct 2020 compared to 963 same period).

The main complaints were around bonfires, fly tipping and accumulation of waste. This could be attributed to the lockdown and people staying home/clearing homes and sheds where the recycling centres were closed for a period of time.

#### h) **Pests**

Pest complaints, 963 from April-Oct 2020 compared to 1180 same period last year). Complaints received in relation to accumulation of waste, warm weather and residents at home paying more attention to their local environment. The demand on the service was compounded by the fact that we were unable to carry out drain surveys, thorough inspection of properties etc. to identify the source/harbourage.

#### i) **Anti-Social Behaviour**

Ongoing work, in conjunction with Police, dealing with neighbourhood disputes through to drug related issues. Targeted aids have proved successful and officers are in the process of taking legal/court action, including injunctions and revocation of tenancies.

#### j) **Private Water supplies**

This work was suspended.

#### k) **Public Health and Wellbeing**

**Air Quality** – monitoring continuing and demonstrating that the lockdown period has dramatically affected air quality in a positive way. Ongoing monitoring and regular update reports demonstrates the effect road vehicle journeys has on improving Air Quality. It also gives an indication as to how critical road vehicle journeys are to achieving our collective aims. It is anticipated that this work can be used to inform future political and community decisions on transport and lifestyles.

A delivery Plan will be produced by the beginning of January 2021

**Contaminated land** – work ongoing as developments and regeneration of communities is increasing. Examples include Pentre Awel and the ambitious affordable homes.

**Noise** – Increase in noise complaints (1081 from April-Oct 2020 compared to 783 same period).

Higher percentage in domestic setting as a result of lock down and more people working from home.

More use of the Noise APP to collate initial intelligence with regards to investigations rather than noise logs. From 1/4/2020 to 6/11/2020 we have received 5219 Noise App recordings compared to 3225 for 2019/20.

#### l) **Food, Safety and Health**

**General** - Food and feed inspections were suspended as officers were involved initially in:

- compliance assessments in accordance with The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations 2020;
- working closely with care homes and the Environment Department offering advice on infection control including cleaning/sanitising and suitable PPE; and
- the establishment of the Infection Control Team in July 2020 also meant that staff were deployed to cover contact tracing and support to Care homes.

**Shellfish sampling** – continued to ensure the classification for commercial gathering. The diesel spill in the Loughor Estuary, however, did cause a precautionary closure of the beds from August 25<sup>th</sup>.

#### m) **Food and Feed inspections/interventions**

The following activity has taken place:

- Four official control inspections were undertaken in relation to field hospitals during their establishment;
- Advisory calls to new 'higher risk' businesses particularly in regards to milk/meat producers/sales;
- Granting of approval of a dairy business in order that they can trade;
- Completion a PGI (Protected Geographical Indication) audit. This is required to protect and promote regional food products (similar to a trade mark); and
- Investigation of feed and food incidents brought to our attention by the Food Standards Agency (FSA).

**Communicable disease-** Officers have continued to investigate non COVID communicable diseases such as salmonella, campylobacter etc.

**Special Procedures-** Officers have continued to work with registered tattoo parlours and body piercers with regards to good working practices and infection control.

**Event Safety Advisory Group-** The multi-agency group has been meeting to discuss and advise organisers on proposed events.

### **3. What have been the workforce implications?**

We are conscious that this has been a hugely difficult time for staff managing both work and challenging situations at home, and staff have been exemplary in the commitment and dedication they have shown.

All staff continue to work from home in the main and maintain contact through regular Teams meetings.

Visits are undertaken when necessary (to businesses and consumers) ensuring all appropriate precautions are taken and social distancing is always observed.

### **4. What have been the key financial issues identified?**

Approval and funding has been made available by Welsh Government for TTP and increased enforcement resource to end of March 2021 at current time.

The financial implications for the POCA fund will be relatively significant in that income in the region of £200,000 will be delayed due to lack of court sessions which have been aborted due to Covid restrictions.

### **5. How have we approached Communication and Engagement?**

Good and regular communication has been critical to supporting staff, as well as recognising the achievements of staff and taking each opportunity to thank them. The use of technology has meant that we are probably in much more regular contact with each other and have taken the opportunity to have regular short meetings. This is something that we would want to continue going forward.

There is regular communication with staff via the internet, newsletters, individual letters, and published guidance. Team meetings have continued via teams and training modules are being made available via e-learning programmes, wherever possible.

We have also carried out extensive welfare calls particularly vulnerable people during this time to ensure they are coping and intervening where it is sensible to do so.

Regular contact has also been maintained between Heads of Service and the Executive Board Member, to ensure everyone is up to date on what is happening.

## **6. What are the key implications moving forward?**

We must make sure that we learn from this unprecedented experience as we reintroduce our services and re-set our strategic and operational priorities. It is not going to be a case of restarting and getting back to the way we were. This is an opportunity to refresh and renew. Recovery Groups have been set up and we are focusing on recovery plans to sustain services following the crisis.

Moving forward generally we will:

- continue to change and adapt the way we work. We are currently looking at how we structure our services moving forward, making sure people can access us as much as possible on a seven day a week basis. We are finding that more and more tenants are using online services and are happy to communicate in this way;
- further develop our modernisation plans for some services e.g. less building-based services, far more agile working;
- require our workforce to be flexible and adaptive in the long term in the event of future uncertainties; and
- build on the flexibility and adaptability staff have shown during this period to create new opportunities and experiences to further develop.

## **7. What lessons have we learnt?**

- Digital solutions will play an ever-increasing role in shaping what we do. Communication has improved significantly, through effective use of virtual technology and going forward, we need to get the right balance between virtual and 'face to face' contact, to make best use of time;
- Staff resilience has been remarkable during this unprecedented time, but we are seeing, understandably, general fatigue across services and fear regarding the future. We are aware of the need to ensure that staff access supervision, support, and occupational health interventions where necessary;
- Improved collaboration within the council and with external organisations. Attendance at multi agency meetings has improved and regular governance forums have enabled decisions to be made quickly, and identified risks responded to swiftly; and
- The pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to work innovatively and we will capitalise on this to continuously improve services. We have inevitably learnt a huge amount during the first wave, which stands us in very good stead to cope with the current second wave. All our processes are in place to manage the various scenarios, so we are confident that we will be able to learn the lessons and manage the challenges ahead together.

### **To consider and comment on:**

#### **1. The Homes and Safer Communities Division's response to COVID-19**